

## SUMMARY

### Amherst elementary schools survey: Equity, transportation, location, configuration

**Who we surveyed:** Parents who live in apartment complexes of PreK to middle school children, plus parents of children with special needs. The intention was to talk *to* the people we mean when we talk *about* equity: families of color, low-income families, English-language learner families, and families with special needs kids. We hoped to help their values and voices be heard.

**Response rate:** Out of about 200 attempted contacts starting 10 days ago, we received about 35 complete responses in English and Spanish, from all three schools, all races, all parts of town, 77% of whom have children with free or reduced lunch.

#### RESULTS HIGHLIGHTS:

- *Do respondents experience the benefits that come from small community schools?* **MOSTLY (51-81%).** Do they value these benefits? **YES! (85-93%)**
- *Do respondents feel included in school decision making?* **NOT ENOUGH** (36% said completely or mostly true)
- *How much does transportation and location matter to parents in relation to their access to schools?* **THEY MATTER** (20-25% rely on non-car transportation)
- *What school configuration would respondents prefer?* **61% would prefer three districted (Pre)K-6.**

#### Conclusions

The results suggest strongly several things:

- a) Choosing reconfiguration in the name of equity is misguided;
- b) Decision making processes have not sufficiently involved the families they purport to be talking about; and
- c) This kind of survey, and open conversations that grow out of it, can prompt thoughtful discussions and sharing in which it is possible to find understanding and compromise.



## Do small community schools matter to Amherst?



### Do they help or hurt equity?



Do small community schools matter in Amherst? We can learn best by engaging in *listening* community conversations.

Instead of talking *about* equity, it's high time we talk *to* the people we mean: families of color, low-income families, English-language learner families, and families with special needs kids. Neither town government nor Town Meeting represent the diversity of Amherst; nor does the School Committee or the district administration. We need real outreach, real listening, and real dialogue.

Several of us set out to find out some answers to these questions – not by theorizing but by *asking families themselves*. We created a survey<sup>1</sup>, took it to apartment complexes, and, if people were willing, talked to them at length about their answers after they completed the survey.

## Amherst elementary schools survey: Equity, transportation, location, configuration

### Results

Our survey was written, edited, sent out, responses collected, and analyzed entirely on volunteer effort, and we had time only to run it for only a week. Out of about 200 attempted contacts we got about 35 responses. While possibly not representative (this would depend on the population variation) they are suggestive, especially given the strong representation among our respondents of people of color, low-income families, English-language learners, and families with children with special needs, and the fact that we received responses from all parts of town and all three schools.

#### Who answered our survey?

##### Apartment complexes and geography:

42% North Amherst, 31% South Amherst, 28% downtown and East Amherst

**Racial/ethnic identity:** 18% African-Am, 35% Latino, 30% Asian, 4% Middle Eastern

**Income:** 77% Free/reduced lunch

**Special ed:** 55% Children with some kind of special ed / needs

**ELL:** 41% Parents of English language learners

**School:** 60% Wildwood, 15% Fort River, 21% Crocker Farm

Do respondents experience the benefits that come from small community schools? **MOSTLY.** Do they value these benefits? **YES!**

"I live in Amherst partly because of the quality of the schools."	71%
"I like my neighborhood in part because it is near our elementary school."	51%
"Children at our school develop a deep sense of belonging and have many long-term relationships with children and adults that help support them."	81% Yes, completely or mostly true
	92% Yes, very important or valuable
"Children and families who go to our school have stronger neighborhood friendships and communities because they share a small community school."	67% Yes, completely or mostly true
	85% Yes, very important or valuable
"Through our school, diverse children and families get to know, feel comfortable with, respect and understand one another."	71% Yes, completely or mostly true
	93% Yes, very important or valuable

How much does transportation and location matter to parents in relation to their access to schools? **THEY MATTER.**

25% of respondents do not have a car, or sometimes do not have access;  
18% have to use a method other than driving a car to get to their children's school

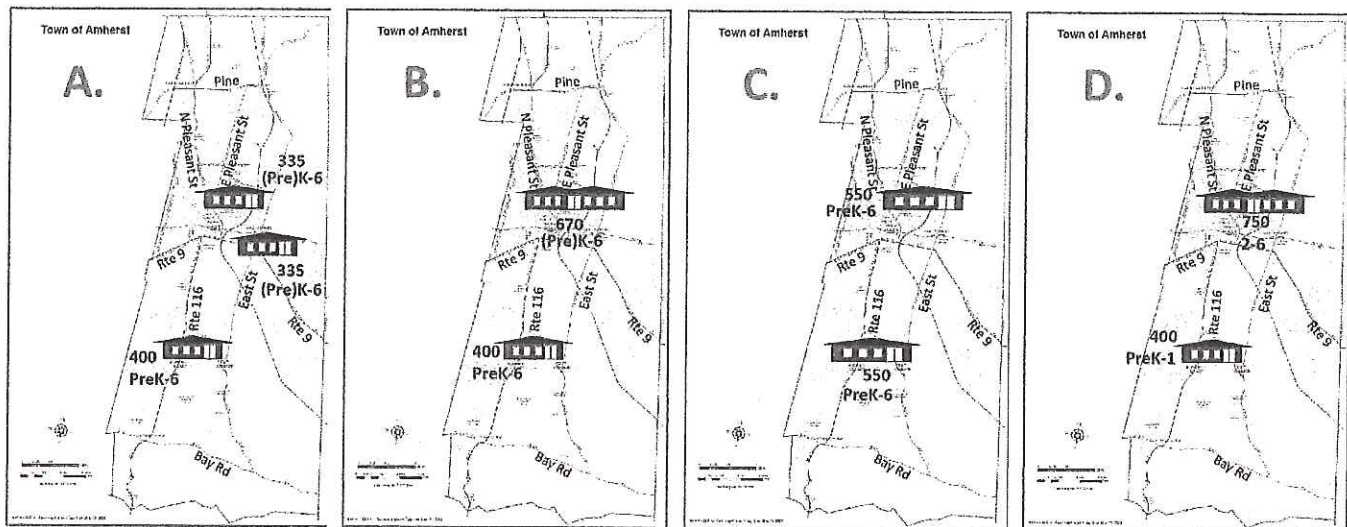
Do respondents feel included in school decision making? **NOT ENOUGH**

"When school leaders make decisions about changes in Amherst's schools, they consult with families like mine and the broader Amherst community, and make decisions based on our opinions, values and input."	36% Yes, completely or mostly true
	100% Yes, very important or valuable

<sup>1</sup> You can see a copy of the survey at: English: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/YG2MF7K>; Spanish: <https://es.surveymonkey.com/r/YG8PHTR>



## What school configuration would respondents prefer?



<b>Three districted K-6 schools at three sites (Crocker, Wildwood and Fort River)</b>	<b>Three districted K-6 schools at two sites (Crocker + Wildwood twin K-6)</b>	<b>Two districted (Pre)K-6 schools at different sites</b>	<b>Consolidated schools, separated grades.</b>
1 <sup>st</sup> choice for 61%	1 <sup>st</sup> choice for 6%	1 <sup>st</sup> choice for 15%	1 <sup>st</sup> choice for 18%

## Nuancing questions and answers

**What about residents of “the islands” – the apartment complexes off East Hadley Rd where children are bused to out-of-neighborhood schools?**

**These families were clear: they appreciate their small community school, but they do not get to enjoy the benefits of having it nearby.**

None of these families felt it was completely or mostly true that they “like my neighborhood in part because it is near our elementary school.” However, 100% said it was completely or mostly true that “Children and families who go to our school have stronger neighborhood friendships and communities because they share a small community school.”

In conversation, both parents and children in these apartment complexes told us they like their school, and they like having their children go there. The problem is that children and families from these communities have been jostled between the schools many times over the years. When kids were switched from Crocker to Fort River or Wildwood after Marks Meadow closed, it was hard. But now they have roots in their school, and they are happy to stay. There are about 32 children who take the bus to Fort River from Mill Valley. They do not feel isolated. It may be more of an issue for children from the Boulders, who are bused to Wildwood, as there are only about 12 of them – but we did not hear this from our respondents from the Boulders. (Numbers per apt complex based on bus route information.)

### Why Option C?

Option C grew out of a number of earlier conversations with people from both sides of the reconfiguration-vs-small-K6-schools debate.

The most pressing and legitimate reasons for reconfiguration are: to avoid repeat redistricting, even out school resources, reduce out-of-neighborhood busing, hopefully lower annual operational costs, and with those reduced costs, increase PreK. All of these would be aided by reducing from three to two school campuses. The loss, however, would be of K-6 continuity and small community schools. Making two schools PreK-6, with one in the north and one in the south, would retain neighborhood connections, protect ease of access to schools for families without cars or with multiple jobs and/or other responsibilities, and end transitions from age 3 to 12. Operational cost savings would likely be better than under any proposal thus far, enabling more preK, and perhaps special needs programs in both schools.

Nonetheless, it also would represent a profound loss for East Amherst families, while failing at the full unification desired by reconfiguration advocates.

Given these complex considerations, we added it to our list of options so people could respond. Having an array of options to think and write about also prompted more reflective answers.

## Conclusions

The results suggest strongly several things:

- Choosing reconfiguration in the name of equity is misguided;
- Decision making processes have not sufficiently involved the families they purport to be talking about; and
- This kind of survey, and open conversations that grow out of it, can prompt thoughtful discussions and sharing in which it is possible to find understanding and compromise.



## **Background on the survey: who we are, what we asked, where we went, and why.**

Eve Vogel, Pct 3 and parent of a Wildwood 6th grader, led the survey effort. She has been part of the SASS network, and the survey was designed specifically bring to light the voices and values that have been inadequately heard, and when discussed have been largely presented as individuals' arguments, without any clear sense of broader community sentiment or any of its nuances. She and others who contributed to the survey worked hard to ask questions in a way that allowed a variety of opinions, as well as openness to points that hadn't been considered. There was significant effort to include the concerns of those who have promoted reconfiguration in designing the survey questions and audience.<sup>2</sup>

Because the justification for reconfiguration has been in large part "equity," we focused our efforts especially on apartment complexes, where most of the town's minority, low-income, and immigrant families reside; and on parents of special needs kids.

Because the position advocating for the preservation of K-6 neighborhood schools has been premised on their ability to offer long-term relationships, a deep sense of belonging, stronger communities within neighborhoods, better access to schools, especially for those without cars, and an ability for kids to be connected within a community that is large enough to be diverse but small enough to know people well over many years and thus gain mutual respect and understanding, we asked whether families experienced those things now, and whether these things were important for the future.

We knocked on doors, had people take the surveys, and afterwards, we talked to them, trying to understand their values and concerns. The people who went out spoke fluent Spanish and we were able to talk to people in either language. When asked by families, we read questions in Spanish or English aloud.

In our outreach to families and in the survey itself, we were open with families that we were emphasizing low-income families, minority families, English-language learner families, and families with children with a range of special needs. We assigned codes so we could keep track and make sure we got one survey for each family, but keep their answers confidential. Having done so, we were able to ask people their race, whether their kids have been English language learners, whether they get free or reduced-price lunch, and whether they participate in any programs for kids with special needs or their kids have special ed plans.

Because people's experience of reconfiguration will depend on where they live, and because their experience now depends both on where they live and where they go to school, we asked them their geography. We recorded data by nearest intersection, village center, or community landmark, to retain confidentiality within this geographical information.

We are incredibly grateful to the many people who took the time to answer our survey on line or in written form, who spoke to us in parking lots and on the phone, and who invited us into their living rooms and kitchens. We feel we know Amherst better because of your graciousness and generosity.

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<sup>2</sup> It must be noted that a survey like this would be stronger with the support, endorsement, and resources of the school district, but this has been impossible. It should be noted that some people tried to influence the Jan 2016 survey to include these kinds of questions and conversations, but they were left out (see e.g. Catherine Corson's Jan 14, 2016 letter to the School Committee, posted on the SASS website, at <https://saveamherstsmallschools.wordpress.com/?s=corson>).